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SUBJECT: POLITICAL PARTIES IN UZBEKISTAN: MUCH PAGEANTRY AND SOME  
PROGRESS

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Representatives of Uzbekistan's four political parties gathered with a number of international observers and "experts" to discuss political parties and elections. Discussion was lively, but the "round table" was quite literally split down the middle, with local politicians on one side of the room and international participants on the other-both physically and ideologically. Uzbek party leaders seemed to take their role in government quite seriously, though they all appear content to allow the GOU to dictate their political agendas. They staunchly defended Uzbekistan's status as an evolving democracy which has made great strides since the demise of the Soviet political system. Local participants were invariably long on "big picture" rhetoric and short on the actual nuts and bolts of achieving any political goals. However, they seemed to recognize the importance of reaching out to voters and responding to the needs of their constituents. END SUMMARY.

UZBEKISTAN'S POLITICAL PAGEANT

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¶2. (SBU) On September 29 and 30, representative of the four Uzbek political parties joined with international experts for a round table discussion of political parties and elections in Uzbekistan. The discussion played like an unaggressive verbal tennis match: an international speaker would lob a question or a (fairly mild) criticism towards the Uzbek participants, who would then respond with a volley of (mildly) defensive and self-congratulatory statements. The Uzbek party leaders and parliamentary representatives gave the general impression that they are all actors in some grand political pageant, playing parts which are scripted for them by the president. (It is significant to note that one of the main sponsors of this round table event was the Academy of State and Social Construction under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan.) The Uzbek participants spoke openly about the influence of the Karimov government on their political platforms, apparently seeing no irony in the fact that the GOU is setting the agenda for each of the parties which are supposedly competing with each other for votes. On the whole, party leaders appeared to be perfectly content with the political status quo, and seemed to genuinely believe that they are playing a constructive and influential role in the formation of policy. Some party leaders made reference to their "sister" parties in other countries-European Social Democrats, for example-reinforcing the impression that the political parties are trying to play a certain role without really understanding it.

WE'RE A YOUNG COUNTRY-CUT US SOME SLACK

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¶3. (SBU) Uzbek party leaders responded very defensively to any real or perceived criticism of the Uzbek political system. They quickly turned the focus to what they view as great progress towards democracy since the fall of the Soviet Union. In response to a question about the Uzbek parliament's "political achievements," several parliamentarians emphasized that Uzbekistan has transitioned from a totalitarian state to a democratic one in a mere fifteen years (with a strong subtext of "what more can anyone

expect of us?"). The leader of the Liberal Democrats said that political parties in Uzbekistan are "young," and advised international observers that they cannot expect "too much at once." He claimed that the upcoming parliamentary election will be yet another step in the right direction, saying that "every election is another stage of our political development."

AND WHAT ABOUT THE VOTERS?

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¶4. (SBU) Many of the party leaders and parliamentarians displayed a greater degree of political passion when they stopped talking about their platforms and started talking about their constituents. Whatever their shortcomings, the Uzbek participants appeared to be quite sincere in their desire to respond to the needs of Uzbek voters. They discussed the importance of reaching out to voters, meeting regularly with their constituents (one parliamentarian claimed to have met one on one with hundreds of his constituents), and giving Uzbek citizens greater access to information about government and legislation.

¶5. (SBU) COMMENT: Differences in local and international perspectives were thrown into sharp relief by the roundtable format of this conference. Local politicians and international observers were like ships passing in the night when it came to their understanding of the role of political parties in a democratic system. Party leaders appeared to be genuinely convinced that they are real players in a political system that may be imperfect but is nevertheless a democracy. Virtually all party leaders came of age in the era of the Soviet Union. In their eyes, political progress

after the fall of the Soviet Union has been enormous, and international observers are unjustly critical of Uzbekistan's democratic growing pains. END COMMENT.  
NORLAND